

Interview – Mohamed Zeeshan

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other young scholars.

Mohamed Zeeshan is a Foreign Affairs columnist, author and Editor-in-Chief of Freedom Gazette. He previously worked with the Indian delegation to the United Nations in New York and with Kearney, the global consulting firm. As a consultant, Zeeshan has advised governments across the Middle East on economic and political modernization, and helped draft a multilateral declaration on cybersecurity at the 2020 G20 Summit in Riyadh. He was also involved in strategizing India's historic election to the International Court of Justice in 2017. Zeeshan is currently a staff writer for The Diplomat and hosts a monthly Sunday column in the Deccan Herald titled 'The Z Factor'. He also contributes insights on Asia-Pacific affairs for the Economist Intelligence Unit and has written for the Washington Post, the Telegraph, Straits Times, the Sydney Morning Herald and South China Morning Post, among other international dailies. His first book, *Flying Blind: India's Quest for Global Leadership*, was published by Penguin in 2021. Zeeshan holds a master's degree in International Affairs from Columbia University, where he edited the online edition of the Columbia Journal of International Affairs.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

I have always been a bit of a travel bug. I was born Indian in Southeast Asia, educated in the United States, worked in the Middle East and elsewhere, and have travelled widely for most of my life, so I've always been fascinated by international affairs and the world's many countries and cultures. But I think this is also perhaps a very "opportune" time for me (and all of us, really) to take an interest in these issues. We tend to underestimate how historic this current era really is. We're living through a pandemic, but we're also living through war, peace and conflict in all its many forms. Globalisation has been a buzzword for the last three decades, but we're now seeing identity wars and nationalism hit back with a vengeance. Trade and immigration are no longer as easy as they were in the 1990s and early 2000s, so the world is not as "flat" as Tom Friedman thought it was only a little over a decade ago. Back then, everybody thought that opportunities were going to be global, poverty was going to diminish steadily, and the world was going to get safer and more prosperous with time. But as we can now see, none of this can really be taken for granted. So, I think that for any curious mind today, international affairs is a topic of fascination, because – now more than ever – we want to try and understand why the world hasn't really progressed very far since World War II. Why have those lessons been forgotten? Why is everybody fighting, why are so many people feeling insecure about their identities and their future, and why aren't we able to come together as humanity to even fight something as existential and universal as, say, climate change?

With multiple commentators and scholars pointing towards the "weaknesses" of the western liberal order over the past decade, and more so post the Russian invasion of Ukraine, do you believe the world order is shifting?

It's certainly shifting. The Western liberal order was largely propped up by America's global presence, including especially its military and security commitments. That monopoly of power is now significantly diluted. As much as one might criticise American hegemony (and there's certainly plenty to criticise on Iraq and Afghanistan), I think the world

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is now moving into a substantially more uncertain and insecure phase of anarchy. America is unlikely to be completely replaced, because there's no country in the world at present that can play the sort of unipolar role that America played in the 1990s and 2000s. But what we're more likely to see is heightened scepticism and mistrust between countries because the laws of the jungle are back. Unlike previously, I think that American military presence is less likely to deter the likes of China or Russia from aggressive militaristic behaviour. But neither China nor Russia has enough influence to supplant the US (in fact, one might argue that both countries are weaker and more vulnerable today, due to several factors, than they were 15-20 years ago). So, the Western order is likely over, but it's hard to see any competing model replacing it.

Given India's exit from the RCEP agreement and greater stress on *Atmanirbharta* (self-reliance), what is your assessment of the current inward-looking posture of India's foreign policy? How does China's rise affect the balance of power in the region?

I know that many people have tried to justify the inward turn and protectionism by citing Covid-19 and how it ravaged several countries because of their reliance on the global supply chain, but to be honest, I think that this is perhaps the worst time to turn inward and become protectionist (not that there is ever a "good time" to do that). Even before Covid-19, the West was trying to reduce its economic dependence on China and that's why India became an important partner: the West hoped that India can replace China – at least in part – in the global supply chain. RCEP was also a product of that, to be honest. As Kishore Mahbubani once reminded me on my podcast at Freedom Gazette, RCEP was not a "Chinese initiative", it was an ASEAN initiative. So, when India pulled out of that deal, many ASEAN economies (and Japan) were vocally disappointed, because they had hoped that India can counterbalance Chinese influence — that they could reduce their dependence on China by strengthening India's role in the regional supply chain. Unfortunately, India appears to have decided that it does not have the confidence to play such a role. Under the circumstances, India is going to have to take a hard look at the competitiveness of its own economy, because if India is unable to play a more robust role in the global supply chain, China's influence will not only persist but it will also make the global economy less resilient – because China's economy is not going to grow at the same pace it has in the last 3-4 decades.

In your book *Flying Blind: India's Quest For Global Leadership*, you argue that India needs a more 'proactive' foreign policy. How far do you think India has come in realizing this goal? What domestic socio-political constraints are affecting India's potential in this area?

I think, at this point in its history, India is sort of redefining itself and, quite frankly, there is a significant amount of uncertainty now about what India is going to look like a few years down the line. In my book, I argued that India's secular constitutional republic was unique in the post-colonial world because it introduced political stability in a very diverse country, unlike so many other former colonies around the world that plunged headlong into a vicious cycle of civil wars. That political stability had given India significant credibility, and its political model—of liberal secular democracy—had won plenty of admirers in the developing world. Over time, that political stability and social harmony had made economic reform and growth possible, and India was suddenly on the verge of greatness. Unfortunately, India is now rethinking its journey and second-guessing its own strengths—wondering whether secularism is the right choice, or whether Hindu majoritarianism deserves appeasement. It's difficult to predict where this battle will take India, but I think that it is one of the biggest international stories to watch out for in this decade. It would be unfortunate if India continues to descend into majoritarianism and communal violence because, as I said, India was really on the verge of greatness. Insofar as the next global superpower is concerned, India is the only country with a young enough and large enough population to play the sort of role that the US has played – as a global hegemonic power – in 2-3 decades time, but that potential will not be realised without more inclusive and enlightened politics.

What are you currently working on?

There are some competing ideas and I'm struggling to figure out which one to devote myself fully to, to be honest. I've been toying with the idea of writing another book, looking at the life and times of Jawaharlal Nehru as a global statesman. I've also been doing some research on how Hindu nationalism is redefining India's identity on the world stage and its practice of foreign policy. But part of me also wants to balance my life as a foreign affairs writer with

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other hobbies – perhaps writing about cricket. The world is really intense right now and one can lose one's mind if one gets overly immersed. But watch my Twitter in the upcoming months!

What is the most important advice you could give to other early-career or young scholars?

Frankly, I'm too young to answer this! But what I've learnt so far is that – I think it's important for all of us to be intellectually honest and do right by our conscience. Don't get swayed by "market forces" because certain views may always be more monetarily or politically profitable at a certain given time, but it's important for researchers and writers to stay resilient against those pulls and pushes and be intellectually honest, even if momentarily unpopular (and poor!).